

# Selection of activities - Elmer



## Visits to museums

Brussels has a variety of very interesting museums. It was not common to visit them with our 2-year old toddlers. The project of Building Educational Bridges in the City challenged us to try out unusual experiences and look for new opportunities.

A first obstacle was getting them with our young children. We had some museums in the very close neighbourhood such as MIMA, where this problem didn't occur. This gave us the opportunity to visit the museum weekly on Friday mornings. For the Natural Sciences Museum and the exposition of Keith Haring in Bozar, we had to plan our trip in between the siesta's and diaper-changes of our children and with the collaboration of enough adults to guide the children in the metro, on the streets and in the museum.

The try-outs went well, so we organised a trip with parents and children. Later on we went to the museum as part of a training workshop for the educators or an evening out with the colleagues. When a new theme was installed in the Natural Science Museum or in MIMA, we went back to discover new things. What started as a try-out became a whole, interesting trajectory, involving children, parents and educators.

## Visits to MIMA, Molenbeek

"The children were very impressed by what they saw in the museum – they were running around and showing their interest "oooh! Whaaw! Look!". They pointed to certain works and smiled or looked surprised. The rooms were very open and offered a lot of space for the children. Children were focussed on colours, textures, materials used. Entering certain rooms, the children were impressed, they wanted to touch the arts and sometimes even sit on them.

In their own little studio they were allowed to sit on high chairs at high tables where all sorts of materials were presented to create what they wanted. They felt very proud about that. They could use "adults-materials" and were allowed to improvise. On other days they would stand and create their works like real painters, or they may just lay down on the floor and feel at ease to create in that way."

"As educator I was very impressed by the way children reacted, it was so special to give these kids the opportunity to discover art and to experiment for themselves. Once they were creating their own art, they invited us, educators, to join in and they handed us some materials. There was a great interaction between the children themselves as with the educators. Through repetition we saw that children got used to it and directly felt at ease: they took the materials and started to work. At the end they even helped to clean things up."

## Visits to the Natural Sciences Museum, Brussels and the Zoo, Antwerp

“Children were totally drawn into the world of the bears and dinosaurs. They were really interested and wanted to find out everything. It took a whole 3 hours to discover everything and they still were not bored.”

“One of the children was laying on the ground on his back. He looked upward to a skeleton of a whale. He pointed to it and recognised an animal in it. For some minutes the other kids joined him and they were examining together the skeleton.”

“We first thought we would have to tell the children everything, to direct them to the things they could see. But we soon noticed that the children were following their own path. The museum was conceived interactive for older children, but that didn't stop the toddlers from exploring. When seeing the elephant they started singing our elephant-song in Elmer.”

“In the Antarctica exhibition the children loved the big screens with the videos of the animals : the penguins, the seals and the whales. They were copying the behaviour of the animals for example walking like the penguins. They also admired the sea from inside the water perspective.”

“One moment we entered a large round room. On the walls we saw a projection of the penguins in their colony. We saw them jumping, sliding, walking like a penguin, ... It was an invitation to do a motor activity with the children. They observed the penguins and tried to copy the movements. We stayed quite long in that room.”

“My children had a really wonderful time. I strongly believe that exposing them early to museums is important for them to learn how to behave in this atmosphere, to learn to appreciate culture in this way and to learn about the exhibition that's being proposed. I also think it's important for the museums to make this space available for small children, and other visitors to accept to share the space as well.” (parent)

“There was one moment when we were in the aquarium. There were 2 divers into the tank, they were cleaning it. At that moment some children really got attracted to it. They went to see the divers and started to interact with them in a kind of sign language. What a blessing to see this moment, where they were looking for interaction in unusual ways. It was almost a representation of the ability to interact in lockdown during corona-times.”

“It was really fun. These were great moments that we shared with the mothers, the children and the entire team! We really enjoyed it. Traveling by train was also great! The children got to know the animals in a fun way. A super outing!”

## Visits to the Keith Haring exposition in Bozar, Brussels

“The children were very impressed of all the works of Haring. The works were very big and very colourful. Children were very enthusiastic, they were motivated throughout the whole exhibition, they really wanted to find all other paintings and drawings. They recognized certain images : dog, men, lamp, baby, ... In a room filled with music and movies, the children tried to imitate the moving images. The children would have stayed longer if they could.”

“They could use all their senses : singing, touching, climbing, colouring ...while enjoying arts.”

“The art of Keith Haring became a very interesting topic inside our centre as well. We painted t-shirts, made drawings, used tape to create the body images of the baby and the dog, ...It was interesting and challenging to have a completely new theme to work with, with the children.”

“We had an excellent experience at Bozar. The works were bold, exciting and full of energy, they are excellent for kids. My daughter especially loved the videos and the blacklight room. We also really enjoyed drawing. Overall, it was a fun exhibition and I think it was fantastic for kids.”

“We have visited the various paintings of the artist and I have found the right choice for children. Keith Haring's creations are colourful with shapes that interest the little ones. Also, each room in the museum was very big and wide so there was no stress, the children were able to use a large space to play and run without damaging the museum material.” (parent)

“It's great that Elmer organises this because we realized how much our daughter loved it. It encouraged us to do it every now and then with her as well.”

## Urban environment

The Building Bridges project sent us out in the streets around our centres. Children, educators and sometimes also parents went to explore buildings, bridges, landscape elements such as the canal or the railroad. They also visited street art and discovered there is more to see and to explore than they would ever have imagined. Strolling through the streets, the children's attention was drawn to all those special objects and constructions. They brought back materials and impressions into the centre, where they processed and explored them through creative activities. The world literally opened up for the children and even the educators.

Outdoor play is necessary for the development of every child. The environment where you live helps determine your opportunities for growth. Playing is learning and the streets in a metropolitan context can be used as backyard. Outside on the street many small things can be discovered: pigeons flying around, pebbles, trees, benches to climb, random passers-by, ... The child naturally interacts with its environment in change. By offering an open range of activities, children can respond to their interests and there is something for every child.

## Exploring the streets and looking for street art

“Together with parents and students we visited the statue of Manneken Pis. We watched him pee. Our little boys recognised their own body and attitudes while going to the toilet. It was very hilarious. We also visited the museum where they keep all the costumes of the statue. There is a naked copy of the statue and we could dress him up.”

“The way the children loved to watch the statue and what each of them discovered in their own way, gives me as an educator the courage to keep looking for new experiments and excursions; also the positive feedback of parents is rewarding.”

“The children loved to search for the paintings and were very thrilled when they found it. The discovery made them curious and motivated them to keep on searching and inventing stories.”

“Children in strollers and on foot walked along famous cartoon paintings on buildings. The educators told them who is on the painting and some stories around these cartoon figures. Along the way the children discovered also the bronze statues there are in Brussels. They touched them and were impressed by the size.”

“In an urban context, playing outside on the street is dangerous. For many children, this “play street” was a unique and first experience. In our neighborhood, there are no quality public playgrounds. We also use this play street to send a signal to politicians and their policies.”

“The educators walked around with the children and were following their leads. For example the children stopped at a puddle of water – a sewers hole – the street benches - ... The caretakers decided to give time to the children and fully follow their steps. They see a game in everything –out of their imagination they can use everything they find and do other activities with items as the once they are ment for.”

## Bridges, trains and water

“Visiting the bridge over the canal, the children were especially interested in the cars, driving under the bridge, the ducks on the water and the houseboats moored at the water side. The loved to throw little sticks in the water, while watching them floating away.”

“We made a Kamishibai-story (Japanese narrative theatre) on the theme of water, babies discovered and experimented with water. The water was used in combination with different materials that floated or sank, dry sand became wet and moisty, children were drawing with wet fingers.”

“We noticed that children are open to discover the world and that they are very curious. You can read the pleasure of discovering in their body language.”

“The educators are pleased to find out that they can do so much with simple materials. It is often not necessary to invent complex activities or look for very special materials. With basic things they can invite children to focus and experiment. A good planning and organization of the activity is necessary: preparing the room and the materials.”

“Day 1 we visited trains in the station, while watching trains passing by and sitting in a train. Day 2 we crafted a train with egg-boxes and driving this train on play-rails. Day 3 we searched for books about trains in de library and took them to the centre. Day 4 we performed a puppet theatre about trains. Day 5 we observed trains from a bridge near Elmer.

We did a lot of activities inspired by the train. It resulted in the box we sent to Osmope in Portugal.”

“Children enjoyed discovering everything about trains; all in different ways and manners. They got to know all different aspects of the train and everything around it. Some of the children were first scared but once they were in the train, they loved singing and waving to the people outside of the train. They sang a song about trains. They looked to every aspect of it, asked questions and pointed to what they saw. Back in Elmer their fantasy play got a boost. They made the trails for the train, asked for tunnels and bridges. Playing with the train, they started making the noises of the train. They shaped different trails.”

“Visiting Train World, a museum about the history of trains, children enjoyed sitting in a real train. They liked walking around in the museum and having a look at all the ancient vehicles. Even the modern trains were there to be discovered.”

“Linking between outside and inside affects children's fantasy play. Starting from their interest strengthens the creative process and provides a new framework for the educators. Every element in the outdoor environment can be discovered and processed in Elmer.”

“Safety sometimes remains an obstacle. We need sufficient guidance to go outside with a group of very young children. Good observation is important. Following the children and responding to what they discover.”

## Bringing art inside Elmer

The various extra-muros explorations in the context of the Building Bridges project also enriched the pedagogical environment inside Elmer. Where ever possible, we tried to pull experiences inside our walls. We invited parents with artistic talents. We had artists in residence during the corona-period. Our artistic handy man came to play music for the children. Impressed about an artistic setting in the House of Cultures in Molenbeek, we crafted look-a-like woolen objects and created a sensory experience for our baby's and we became acquainted to artists we met on the market.

“An artist made a interational installation of woolen objects in the House of Cultures, children were free to modify the objects. There was a natural interaction with other children and their parents who were participating in this event. Every participant could enjoy this activity on his own way. The materials provided served as communication tools between the children and adults. Children had a wonderful experience. They were relaxed and enjoyed it a lot. The fact that this was a Brussels house with all different languages made it special. It turned out that there was no need for a common language to understand each other. The contact through materials and movements was enough. We were so excited about this experience, that we started to craft our own woolen objects and installed this in our baby-room.”

“Artists, dancers and musicians, daily created a short performance for our children and their parents. It was the first time they performed for such a young audience. The contemporary dance and music invited children to participate. The artists responded to children's reactions and interacted. For the dancers and musicians, this was an opportunity to test and adjust their creation. They could discover what worked as interaction, what made children laugh, what was their tension level,... A win-win situation!”

“Some children had a wait-and-see attitude with this new experience. When one child takes initiative, other children soon follow. Children find contemporary dance and music funny. There was a lot of laughter when the dancers and musicians made strange movements or funny noises.”

“Abdessamad, our handyman, was in his traditional clothes and brought his instruments in the group. He was playing the instruments and dancing. The children got in touch with a different kind of music and instruments. They were very curious about the traditional costume and songs.”